

Focus Article for The School Administrator

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Hope is not a good strategy when it comes to school district elections. Yet, it's perhaps the most common.

Our team has had the good fortune of working on more than 70 school district elections over the last 10 years and has experienced the evolution of campaign strategy from impersonal mass communication techniques to today's highly targeted campaigns.

With the advent of social media technologies and sophisticated voter targeting software, successful elections are more of a science than a guessing game.

The *principal element* in this elections science project is voter targeting.

Though we encourage districts to communicate with every resident in their boundaries about their election because we believe they have a moral obligation to do so, we also encourage a deeper level of communication with registered voters who are most likely to vote. With a little help from voter targeting software we can research voting history within any school district boundary.

The Belton Independent School District in Belton (TX), 40 miles north of Austin, experienced a big win recently due in large part to their willingness to conduct an experiment in the science of modern election planning.

Belton ISD identified all registered voter households with at least one voter who voted in 50 percent or more of all elections held over the previous five years. Why? Many registered voters never or rarely vote. Identifying those most likely to vote allows a targeted, one-to-one approach with those voters most likely to directly impact the outcome of your election.

Let's take that concept a step further. Merge that voter data with student directory information and we have a list of likely registered voter parents by campus. We merge the data with various local lists, including civic club memberships, booster clubs, employee directory information, ad infinitum.

This was an incredibly successful strategy for Belton ISD. With her lists of likely voters by campus, then-superintendent Vivian Baker, a few members of her staff, and a couple of school board members began making phone calls.

"When you first suggested we call the registered voters with children in our schools, I thought, 'Oh, no! I can't do one more thing.'" Dr. Baker said. "But I took a deep breath and started my calling the very next day, and I finished them in a few days – almost 100 calls! The experience was so worthwhile for me; the majority of the people were friendly and seemed appreciative. Not one call was outwardly negative."

A voter who receives a call directly from the superintendent reminding them to vote and asking if they have any questions is inspired to vote... and vote yes.

Winning an election doesn't begin with the campaign, however. Success begins early and includes a host of supporting elements. These are:

- revisiting your strategic plan
- engaging community and staff
- involving your board
- doing your homework
- developing an appropriate ballot proposition
- developing a clear and concise message
- communicating consistently via a healthy blend of print, electronic, and social mediums.

The earliest, and perhaps most important of these elements is your strategic plan. If you don't have one, get one because without context nothing has meaning. Your district's strategic plan provides

context and makes your election more than just an important activity. It becomes a cornerstone in your efforts toward achieving your district's vision.

Once your strategic plan is in place, the next step is organizing a community advisory committee to review all vital signs and relevant reports. Allow this committee to recommend a course of action to your board of trustees and honor the committee's work. This will build community-driven momentum and energy around your election. In many cases the members of this committee go on to create a Political Action Committee (PAC) that will help get out the "vote yes" message to your voters, so it is important that they have a positive experience.

Following are a few more key elements:

- Conduct an objective voter opinion assessment about the election and about the district overall. Make sure it measures levels of public confidence in district leadership. Conduct this assessment at the beginning of your planning process and again 60 days prior to election day to gauge voter attitudes. Adjust your messages and tactics accordingly.
- Engage your board, district leadership, staff, and community in the planning process and in the election campaign to the extent permissible by state law. Some states have restrictions on school district staff and board members regarding their participation. We recommend the better-safe-than-sorry approach. Stick to the facts. Avoid advocating for passage of the election via persuasive language or speech, unless your state clearly allows it.
- Design an appropriate, community-driven plan that fits the educational needs and financial capacity of your district. Make sure the package is one that will move your district forward within the context of your district's strategic plan.
- Create a clear, concise, and consistent message. While a newsletter mailer may be appropriate, the most effective strategies focus on one-to-one, targeted communications. Incorporate Facebook, Twitter, and blogging. Go to the voters. Make presentations. Make phone calls. Knock on doors. You'd be surprised how shocked and delighted a voter will be to see you on their doorstep. Your website, email, and texting are other communication vehicles to incorporate.
- Celebrate. Plan a community-wide celebration where you and your supporters can enjoy the fruits of their labor.
- And finally, keep your community informed between elections. Continue communicating as if you have another election on the horizon. Ultimately, this science project is about much more than winning your election. It can be the first step in an enduring journey toward strengthening public confidence and trust in your school district and its leadership.

*Scott Milder is a principal and partner with Cambridge Strategics, a firm that has successfully led its clients to 67 election victories totaling more than \$7.3 billion in bonds since 2001 with a success rate north of 90 percent. Cambridge is the nation's leading provider of strategic planning for systems of education, serving 1,100 clients over the last 30 years. Milder is founder, president and CEO of Friends of Texas Public Schools ([www.fotps.org](http://www.fotps.org)) and has served as public information officer for two school districts. He can be reached at [smilder@cambridgestrategics.com](mailto:smilder@cambridgestrategics.com).*